

Great Hikes in Tennessee State Parks:

Savage Gulf – A Winter Hike for Scenic Views

By Fran Wallas

An overnight hike to the Dinky Line Campsite area in Savage Gulf State Natural Area near Palmer, part of the South Cumberland Recreation Area, is like an elastic waistband. The hike can expand or contract depending on the size of your energy and breadth of your skills.

By following the trail map, you can choose shorter or longer routes to your destination. If you are going to camp overnight, you need to fill out a permit at the ranger station. The permits are free. If you are day hiking, you need to register at the kiosk.

Start the hike on the Savage Day Loop Trail. The first mile of the trail is an easy stroll. There are wooden footbridges and a beautiful suspension bridge so you won't get your feet wet. In a mile, you will come to a sign with several choices. Go to the left following the arrow to "North Rim Trail 1.2 miles." Follow the trail and do not turn left on the South Rim Trail. At 1.5 miles you will see a short spur trail with blue blazes. This is the first overlook and the best view of Savage Falls. In winter, the flow is at its fullest. The hardwoods have shed their leaves so you get the best views.

After returning to the main trail, you will soon come to "Rattlesnake Point Overlook." A fun part of hiking in the winter is no rattlesnakes, no ticks, and no chiggers. At 2.2 miles, you begin the North Rim Trail to the left. You will come to another suspension bridge over Meadow Creek. Just before the bridge is your last place to filter water to refill your water bottles. There

may not be water at the campsite. To be extra careful, start the trip with enough water for the whole hike.

After you cross the bridge, there is a wide junction. The North Rim Trail goes left. The North Plateau Trail goes right. If you have had enough hiking or the light is starting to fade, you can take the North Plateau Trail and be at the campsite in another 1.4 miles. If you are ready for more overlooks, continue on the North Rim Trail. Savage Creek Overlook provides a view of the creek and a large area of the gulf. There are many overlooks for lunch, snacks and rest stops. The views of the gulfs and steep bluffs are spectacular.

If you are a hardcore hiker and lucky enough to get a space at Hobbs Cabin, you may want to go another 3.5 miles past the turnoff to the Mountain Oak Trail to Hobbs Cabin where there is a spring for your water refill. The rest of us will turn right on Mountain Oak Trail. Keep watching for deer and turkeys often found in this area. After a total of six miles you will arrive at the Dinky Line camp area. There are only four campsites, and each is tucked in the woods away from the other sites. There is a primitive toilet but you need to bring your own toilet paper. This camp area is not used as frequently as the popular Hobbs Cabin. You will experience the joys of being alone in the wilderness with no light other than the stars and the moon.

Your return to the ranger station is a very easy four-mile hike. Notice that part of the trail is on the route of the old Dinky Line narrow gauge railroad



Fran Wallas

The suspension bridge at Meadow Creek on the North Rim Trail in Savage Gulf.

that was used to transport timber out of the wilderness. If you want a longer hike on your return, you can take the South Rim Trail and hike down to the bottom of Savage Falls. After experiencing this taste of wilderness, you will understand why it has been designated as a National Natural Landmark.

Directions

Take I-24 to Exit 127 (Pelham/Winchester) and take Highway 50 East. Turn right on South 108. Follow the brown signs to "Savage Gulf State Park" about 13 miles and turn left on Highway 399. Go five miles to the park entrance on the left. The trail starts at the ranger station. Trail maps are available at the ranger station and kiosk.

Savage Gulf State Park



A view from the Savage Creek Overlook in Savage Gulf.



Fran Wallas

(Fran Wallas is an avid hiker. She works as an attorney for the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation in Nashville. You can read about her other Great Hikes in Tennessee State Parks at www.tdec.net/greathikes.)